

**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF  
THE MODERN RISK SOCIETY:  
SOCIO-CULTURAL, ECONOMIC AND  
LEGAL ASPECTS**

*Monograph*

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eBook ISBN 978-80-88415-06-0

Print ISBN 978-80-88415-05-3

**OKTAN PRINT  
PRAHA 2021**

Recommended for publication by the Uzhhorod National University (Protocol №4 dated 22.04.2021)

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**Challenges and opportunities of the modern risk society: socio-cultural, economic and legal aspects:** monograph; Editors N. Varha, B. Hvozdetzka. Praha: OKTAN PRINT, 2021, 169 p.

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The publication is assigned with a DOI number: **10.46489/CAOTM-21042601**

The paper version of the publication is the original version. The publication is available in electronic version on the website:

**<https://www.oktanprint.cz/p/challenges-and-opportunities-of-the-modern-risk>**

Passed for printing 26.04.2021

Circulation 50 copies

Cover design: *Bohdanna Hvozdetzka*

eBook **ISBN** 978-80-88415-06-0

Print **ISBN** 978-80-88415-05-3

OKTAN PRINT s.r.o.

5. května 1323/9, Praha 4, 140 00

[www.oktanprint.cz](http://www.oktanprint.cz)

tel.: +420 770 626 166

jako svou 46. publikací

Vydání první

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DOI: 10.46489/CAOTM-21042605

**4. POLITICAL CYNICISM: UNIVERSAL SOVIET HERITAGE -  
AFTERTASTE – DANGER**

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**Introduction.** Most modern challenges facing society are shaped by the political elite and the transience of political processes that drive its actions. Political realities daily challenge full-fledged development of modern society. Political pragmatism which is reflected in the nature of political decisions made by the elite, increasingly goes beyond what is permissible and turns into political cynicism. Of course transience of political cynicism's spread cannot be called the 21st century's phenomenon. It has existed and has been actively used in politics since the Renaissance period. However, the relevance of studying its modern manifestations is associated with the growing real threat to the full development of modern civilized societies, since political cynicism has actively shifted from the sphere of theoretical discourse to the field of political practice. And the key merit in this belongs to a greater extent precisely to the political elites who personify political power and are directly involved in the process of making and implementing political decisions.

Cynicism indicates the political erosion of previous methods and destruction of principles and norms, which does not contribute to the formation of new institutional relations. On the contrary, it leads to confrontation between the state, represented by political elites and the society. And in the case of states with an established democratic tradition, the spread of political cynicism is an undoubtedly dangerous political occurrence, in states in a democratic transition, including post-Soviet ones, the consequences of the «excess» of political cynicism may ultimately present themselves in the form of a threat to statehood.

Many researchers have addressed the problem of cynicism, in particular political cynicism at various times. Thus, N. Machiavelli created a set of cynical rules for a political director. Discussions about “cynicism” in the context of politics, philosophy, morality are also presented in the works of P. Sloterdijk, S. Žižek, T. Buse, D. Mazel, L.D. Gudkov and other researchers.

The purpose of this study is to retrace how political cynicism in the actions of political elites affects the process of building and developing statehood in the post-Soviet space.

**Literature review.** To begin with, it should be noted that political cynicism is characteristic of people who, in their behavior and political convictions, strive to

achieve their own selfish goals by any means. It is defined as a quality of nihilistic attitude towards various kinds of human culture heritage, especially towards the ideas of human dignity. Beside that, cynicism finds its expression in the form of mockery and derision, mainly in relation to the official forms of the dominant ideology. Sources of cynicism are customarily viewed from two points of view.

The first one is associated with the personification of political cynicism as a type of force imparted to the ruling groups, political elites, who, in the process of exercising their authoritative capabilities and achieving their own selfish goals, resort to immoral methods of management and the realization of political interests.

The second one stems from rejecting lawlessness and injustice, in other words oppression from the ruling groups, which are guided by ideological hypocrisy and is realized through the rebellious moods and actions of the oppressed social circles due to a prolonged state of hopelessness and inability to change the situation. This understanding of cynicism has been widespread in post-Soviet states since late 1970s and has long been considered as comprehensive and commonly accepted.

If we look at cynicism from an ethical point of view, then it is necessary to turn to the «Dictionary of Ethics» edited by I. Kon, which was published in 1975. In it, cynicism is defined as «a moral quality that characterizes a contemptuous attitude towards the culture of society, towards its spiritual, and especially moral values ... initially it is a return to the «natural state». Subsequently, cynicism has been defined as the words and deeds which insult the sum of human culture's historical achievements, mockery of moral principles, ridicule of ideals, violation of human dignity. Cynicism in behavior and beliefs is characteristic of people who pursue their selfish interests by all possible means, including immoral ones» [1, p. 342].

As for political cynicism, this term has been actively used since the 1960s. Primarily it had been used in political sciences. In general, political cynicism is meant as the conviction that politicians, political groups and political institutions cannot be trusted, they cannot be relied on even in the absence of information on specific actions they are taking. [2, p. 3].

It is generally accepted that with political cynicism, representatives of the authorities grossly disregard public opinion and they are not interested in anything other than power and wealth accumulation that they achieve through repression and corruption. The most common interpretation of political cynicism is that it is the opposite of political trust. Supporting mentioned above, an example can be cited where in the index of «trust in government» developed by the research center of Michigan's University, one borderline indicator is designated as political trust, and the other as political cynicism [3, p. 33-48]

If we allude to history, then the first theorist of political cynicism is considered to be N. Machiavelli, and his short treatise «The Prince» - the first set of cynical rules of effective political management [4]. Machiavelli's teaching is presented as a political cynicism's system of ideas, which is based on grounds of political realism. Its key features include double standards in politics, recognizing the state having highest value than a person, moral relativism and immorality, inhuman balance of ends and means, idealization of the monarch striving to keep his

power. Machiavelli's treatise «The Prince» is not so much a prototype of the phenomenon of cynicism in its modern understanding and its use both in the scientific political-philosophical environment and in practice, but more of a rule set that should not be used in the process of governing the state, provided its democratic development. Interpretation of political cynicism's distinctive feature is the fact that in Machiavelli's time, cynicism in politics was declared more openly. This was due to the so-called «monarch's divine right», which served as an ideological background for building a system of their actions. In the modern period political cynicism has begun to disguise itself under the concepts of protecting state interests, preserving sovereignty and building universal rules of the game in a geopolitical context. And these clichés are produced by the so-called meaning manufacturers. Beside political cynicism, their style of political behavior is characterized by such characteristics as impertinence and lies. Besides, more audaciously they are used the more effective a short term result will be. And although the pettiness of these manifestations of cynicism is hidden behind simulacra of intellectualism, society will have to pay for its consequences.

As we can see, the key role of cynicism's demagogic disguise under various kinds of ideological clichés is assigned primarily to the political elite. And this was especially pronounced during the time of the Soviet Union's existence.

Thus, the course on perestroika announced in 1985 made it possible to find a balance between the political line under new conditions and moral principles in order to soften moral ambivalence. It was needed to revise the logic of the Soviet Union's power in order to find a way out of moral impasse. The goals of building a just society were contradicted by the facts of widespread corruption and cynicism's manifestation in everyday life, reflecting the moral particularism and moral relativism of the entire society. As M. Garcelon noted, perestroika revealed Soviet leadership's deep division in understanding how to deal with the existing «inconsistencies». So «... already the early phase of perestroika created ex nihilo a fragile public area in the political field, subordinated in advance to broad authoritarian control, opening up opportunities for the rapid growth of opposition to the authorities and the policies of the CPSU» [5, p. 39].

In the USSR the word «elite» had a negative connotation as a whole. During the perestroika period, a «politically encouraging» concept of the «elite» emerged as «alternative progressive forces» opposing the Soviet regime. However, the «political closed nature», as a representative indicator of society, has become damaging to the political elite. An unsuccessful attempt to transform society from «closed» to «open» has become the reason for the spread of political distrust and cynicism in society. Since the mid-1990s, the label «political elite» has been used for self-identification of groups fulfilling a political commission for a «national idea», serving the ruling power and its potential competitors. One of the clearest manifestations of cynical consciousness in the sphere of public policy of that time was the politically advantageous transformation of «reasonable oppositionists» into owned officials for the government. «It is more like morality itself put in the service of immorality - the model of cynical wisdom is to conceive probity, integrity, as a

supreme form of dishonesty, and morals as a supreme form of profligacy, the truth as the most effective form of a lie. «, - noted Slavoj Žižek [6, p. 129-130]. Nature of the modern formation of nationwide elites in various countries is politically multidirectional (in France the elites are being renewed, in Russia they are stabilizing but not circulating). The result is a world of two different trust realities. The informed public - wealthier, more educated, and frequent consumers of news - remain far more trusting of every institution than the mass population. Distrust is being driven by a growing sense of inequity and unfairness in the system. The perception is that institutions increasingly serve the interests of the few over everyone. Government, more than any institution, is seen as least fair; 57 percent of the general population say government serves the interest of only the few, while 30 percent say government serves the interests of everyone. Evidence suggests that today, more than ever, people want to have a greater say in shaping the policies that affect their lives beyond the opportunity to vote every few years. The «stealth democracy» thesis, which argues that people do not want to intervene in public policy and they care only about outcomes, has come under scrutiny. Citizens' perceptions of fairness, in process as much as in outcome, is a critical dimension of their trust in government. Paul Webb coined the concept of 'dissatisfied democrats' – people who are unhappy with the current state of democracy, but are enthusiastic about all forms of political participation, which are more active and deliberative. More recent empirical research in the United States has found that a majority of people are willing to take an opportunity to deliberate with fellow citizens and their member of Congress; moreover, «those most willing to deliberate are precisely those who are turned off by standard partisan and interest group politics» [7]. Notable there is a certain political establishment, which «in the name of its geopolitical and value systems» specifically demonstrates double standards in relation to political and civil protests (the ban on abortion in Poland, «yellow vests» in France, events in Belarus, etc.), which provokes political actors to join discussion. The policy of double standards is a fundamentally different application of principles, laws, rules, assessments to the same type of actions of various subjects: the actions of «insiders» are justified, while the same actions of «outsiders» are condemned and considered unacceptable.

This is explained and justified by the political reality in which «all versus all» type of struggle is being waged. And in this struggle is waged by fair means or foul. In this context, it is appropriate to recall that this principle was adhered to by N. Machiavelli, who argued that there is no room for sentimentality in politics, and a good politician can deceive for the good of the state [4, p. 109-136]. But, unfortunately, what is good for one nation is bad for another. If the current trends in the world continue, the use of double standards will intensely develop. This process was recorded back in the last century by the famous futurologist A. Toffler [8, p. 43-46]. He presented that the world is becoming more inconstant, incomprehensible, unstable, and this represents a shocking future as a challenge to humanity. Durability and inviolability remain in the past, today the demand for momentary utility is increasing (probably the society will be challenged by Brexit and,

potentially in the near future, by efforts to weaken the United Kingdom with increasing pressure for Scottish independence and a local drum beat for a border poll). This essential tendency is reflected in modern forms of international interaction. Today the form is becoming more and more disposable. If previously international law could be likened to a sturdy barrel for storing wine, today it is more of a paper bag that is easy to dispose of as soon as its contents are consumed.

The political cynicism of the elites shows itself in a disdainful attitude towards universal values, in justifying the exclusiveness of the managerial role and the need to distance the ruling circles from the masses, in self-confidence and denial of a critical attitude towards decisions being made. Manifestation of political cynicism is recruiting into the administrative apparatus on the basis of loyalty and personal devotion. As a result - lack of principle and looking for ways to avoid responsibility by managers at various levels. The cynical reaction involves claim that legal enrichment is much more effective than robbery, and besides, it is also protected by law. «What does bank robbery mean in comparison to the establishment of a new bank?» - said Bertold Brecht in «The Threepenny Opera». The political cynicism of the elites as an abuse of power transforms the vertical pressure of power on the population into various forms of horizontal pressure, intolerance and aggressiveness, social apathy and atomization.

Political cynicism in the international arena is becoming a generally accepted phenomenon and associated with the vulgarly understood notion of political success («love yourself, be cynical in your choice»). This is indeed some characteristic of modern discourse, philosophical and informational culture. The modern political cynicism demonstrated by the mass media has become a particular «occupational disease» of politicians and media figures. Conflict discourse aimed at discrediting a political opponent is based on the use of «political exposure»: insults, verbal attacks, degrading statements. The scandal is being «politically accustomed» as a regular cynical means of political struggle.

Specifically, the discrediting form of conflict discourse associated with moral nihilism, violation of the communication norms and behavior that manifests itself in political cynicism. This is a person's total defenselessness in face of total political information, which deprives him of the means of protection. Thus meanings and ideas that are put into people's heads don't correspond to their true preferences and opinions.

Cynicism and pragmatism are the same European values as human rights. Historically in the European tradition, there has always been a powerful rationalization of emotions and desires (all crusades in one way or another were reduced to one thing - looting, seizing new territories, but under moral godly slogans). Similar hypocrisy can be seen in contemporary international politics.

Let's look at the lessons of political cynicism from a democratic Europe. The most striking examples of the use of political cynicism in the geopolitical practice of the XX century are the Munich agreement (1938), the non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR (August 1939) and the Treaty of Friendship between the USSR and the Reich (September 1939).



The Europe of values gave way to the Europe of pragmatism and now to the one of a cynical politics. Ukraine, as an aggrieved party in the conflict with Russia, to some extent tried to break this system, speaking about its interests from viewpoint of their values – «we need, but you must». However, the impulses for the settlement of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict are actively opposed by the politically stable European position: «security - yes, interests - yes, but what do we care about your problems?» Over the years of confrontation with Russia, Ukraine has failed to become politically and economically interesting enough for Europe to push Russia to the margins. The Ukrainian government was unable to offer the Europeans investment-worthy projects of such a level and in such a number. This European position (dialogue and communication with cunning hints for the purpose of certain benefits) itself drives Europe into a trap, which in the near future will be quite safe, so «why not take the risk».

At the same time, the European community doesn't hurry in Russia's embrace. At best, it arranges its affairs at the expense of Moscow (Turkey agreed to lay a gas pipeline on its territory, while bargaining for substantial discounts in gas prices and immediately opposed the annexation of Crimea). So Russia urgently showed international support for the so-called «healthy powers» of Europe and America. But there is nothing new or unexpected here. This is what the Soviet Union did, organizing and financing from the communist parties and relevant public organizations the movement of peace supporters, protest demonstration against American policy. They gathered all over the world, since it is not difficult in democratic states. They shouted slogans from the stands, wrote declarations, demands, etc. But the effect was practically zero. Therefore, on the pages of «Pravda» and «Izvestia», the USSR's main newspapers, much was written about international support for the Soviet peace policy.

Using the Soviet Union's experience and the newly formed states after its collapse, we can conclude that the cynicism generated by political mistakes manifests itself, on the one hand, in mass disappointment in the consistency of managerial practices, and, on the other hand, in the substitution of concepts and masking of cynicism with conditionally necessary ad hoc positive categories, provided that in parallel there is a stigmatization of those who disagree with such negative *clichés* as «the fifth column», «national traitors» and others [9, p. 73-81].

It should be noted that Soviet political cynicism has grown so deeply into the consciousness of the Soviet people that, even after becoming citizens of independent states, feeling the «freedom of speech's taste», renewing the process of forming their identity, their political reformatting is still inhibited. «And the greatest, most undoubted scoundrel has never yet reached such cynicism to publicly recognize himself as a scoundrel and be proud of this title» - this is how Saltykov-Shchedrin described the eternal city Glupov [10, p. 277]. The depth of the «political zombification» of post-Soviet societies with Soviet cynicism can be described in a similar way. But in order to assert this with confidence, one needs impressive arguments and evidences, it is necessary to «measure» the manifestation of political cynicism. To measure it at the present stage of development of political science,

there are various approved methods [11, p. 123-135; 12, p. 425-447]. in which political cynicism can be viewed also as a factor that undermines people's faith in the ability to influence the actions of politicians. The more people believe that politicians are dishonest, lie to voters and care only about their own interests, the less they believe that politicians will react to their actions. It can be noted that political cynicism has the same effect on the perception of conviction in the unreliability and incompetence of politicians.

But in this situation, we can observe an unambiguous paradox in the actions of political elites holding leading positions in the state. Instead of increasing the level of legitimacy, establishing contact with society and endearing it to themselves, the elites seek to strengthen their positions by any ways, ignoring all the principles of the state's democratic functioning and concentrating only on increasing their own powers by any means. And political cynicism in this situation acts as a key instrument to achieve this goal.

The most dangerous from the point of view of preserving statehood is the loss of a balance between the constructive use of mechanisms for forming an state policy and the excesses in the use of manipulative technologies to control society and public opinion. Otherwise, the crisis prevention policy will result in a rapid increase in confrontation within society and towards the state, which in the future will be able to lead to the levelling of the legitimacy of political institutions and the crisis of statehood in general [13, p. 307].

Hence, the level of trust in a country's political management is inversely proportional to the level of political cynicism that guides it in the process of making and implementing political decisions.

**Results.** For a comparative analysis on the level of preservation and political cynicism's spread in the former Soviet republics, the study used the index of trust in the government (political management of the state), the data of which is inversely proportional to the level of involvement of political cynicism in the implementation of state policy. Data taken from the «Nations in Transit» research conducted annually by the non-governmental organization «Freedom House» [14, 15].

The numbers in this study range from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates the highest level of trust in the government and, therefore, the lowest level of political cynicism. And 7, on the contrary, attests to distrust of the state's political management and a high level of manifestation of political cynicism in political elites' decisions and actions.

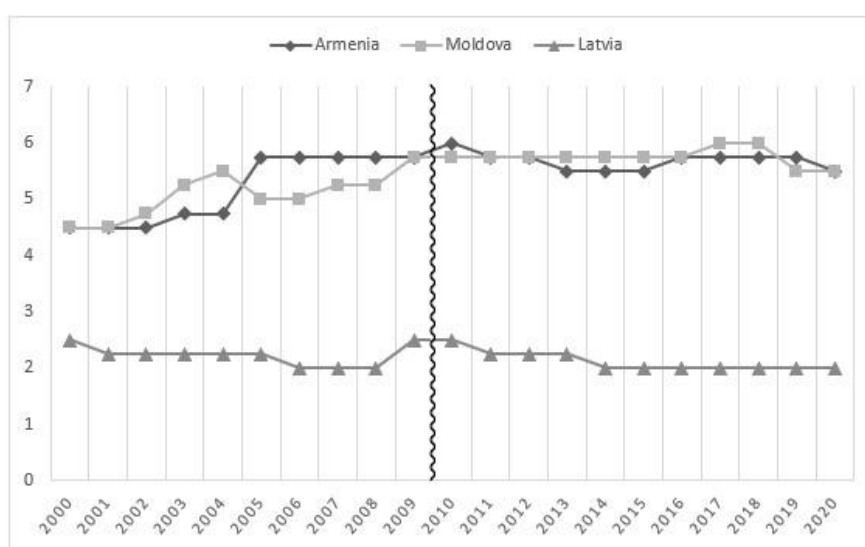
A branch of states was selected for the analysis that are most distinguished by Soviet heredity: the clearly defined leaders of the democratic vector of development (the Baltic states, in particular Latvia), transit states (Ukraine, Moldova), with partially authoritarian tendencies (Armenia) and consolidated authoritarian regimes (Belarus, Russia). These states were divided into two groups for purposes of clarity and convenience in analyzing the data obtained. In one of them, along with states characterized by consolidated authoritarian regimes, a transit state was added to construct the diagram. And in the second, one of the leaders of the democratic

vector of development in the post-Soviet space was added to the transit and partially authoritarian states.

The period from 2000 to 2020 was chosen as the time interval. This is explained by the fact that after gaining independence and until 2000 post-Soviet states were «at dawn» of building statehood, which was accompanied, as it so happens, by a protracted process of searching for options and forms of further development acceptable for each of them, and by strong influence of the universal Soviet legacy. The period from 2000 to 2010 shows the current result of building of independent states, illustrated by the level of residual influence of the legacy of Soviet cynicism.

And the period from 2010 to 2020 characterizes current trends and possible concerns associated with the preservation and spread of political cynicism in the former Soviet republics.

Analysis of the research results (Figure 2 and Figure 3) showed that in both the first period (2000-2010) and the second one (2010-2020), there is no significant dynamics of political affinity and trust in state's political management in Latvia. Over the entire time period, it remains stably high, and therefore the level of manifestation of political cynicism in political elites' activity is quite low.



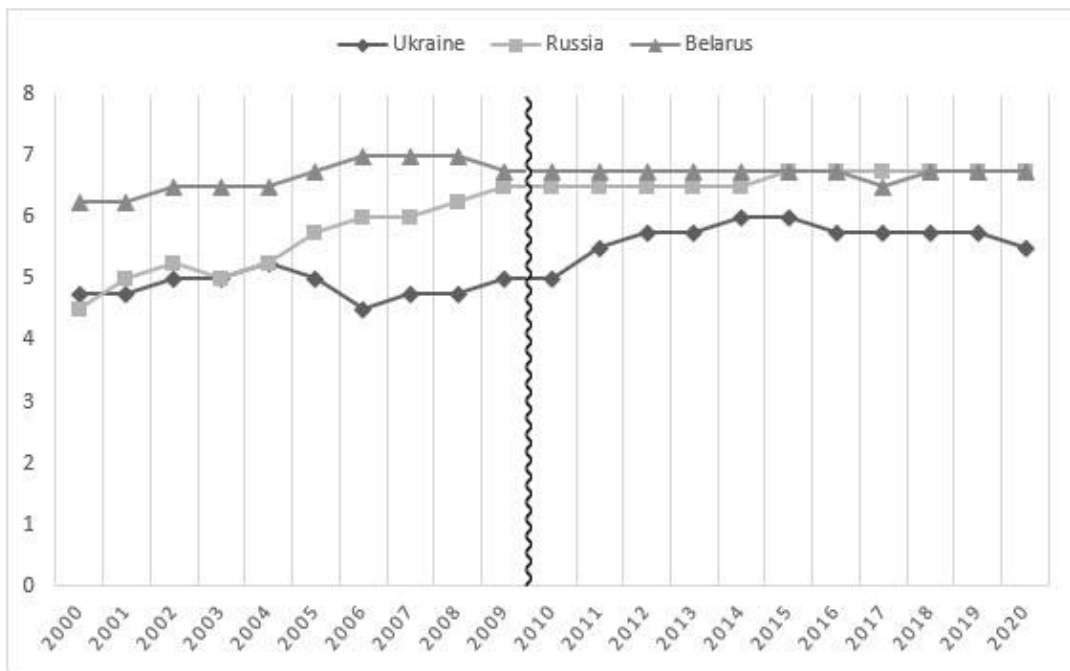
**Figure 2.** The level of manifestation of political cynicism in the political elites' activity in Armenia, Moldova, Latvia

*Source:* Developed by the authors based on Nations in Transit Report (2000-2020) data

This can't be said about other states. It is noteworthy that both in transit states (Ukraine, Moldova) and partially authoritarian (Armenia), and in consolidated authoritarian regimes (Russia, Belarus), despite the fact that the states chose different political guidelines for development, in the period from 2000 to 2010 there was an active growth of mistrust and the preservation of the Soviet traditions of political cynicism (the persistent conviction of citizens that politicians and political

institutions of different political doctrines cannot be trusted, they cannot be relied on) - the period of the «Soviet legacy».

In the next decade, such an active dynamic was not observed in the above mentioned states. This period is characterized by «political depersonalization of cynicism». Citizens of the former Soviet republics cannot get rid of this «Soviet legacy» still, which over time has developed into a «Soviet aftertaste» - «a state of deliberate disappointment - a readiness for the usual worst-case scenario» [16, p. 365]. And if the trend does not change, then a consistently high level of manifestation of political cynicism in political elites' activity may lead to the danger of statehood's existence.



**Figure 3.** The level of manifestation of political cynicism in the political elites' activity in Ukraine, Russia, Belarus

*Source:* Developed by the authors based on Nations in Transit Report (2000-2020) data

At the same time, any attempts to revive the formula of Henry John Palmerston («Great Britain has no constant friends or enemies but rather constant interests») [17, p. 182-209] can only aggravate the international situation and a qualitatively new round of political confrontation.

**Conclusion.** The universalism of political cynicism lies in the fact that it has always been present in the political arena and played a very significant role in states' functioning. Various political elites actively used the spread of political cynicism in their instrumental arsenal to maintain power. In the short term, it could bear a positive impact. However, in the long term, the abuse of political cynicism could deal a crushing blow to statehood.

Widespread in both Western democracies and post-Soviet states political cynicism created certain rules of the game, when each party, both the political elite and society, obeyed them. Although, in fact, both sides were well aware of the falsity of political statements and norms, but at the same time were masking political cynicism with the concepts of protecting state interests, preserving sovereignty and building universal rules of the game in a geopolitical context.

Certainly, society became the most vulnerable link as a result of political cynicism's use. That was exactly who directly felt on itself all the negative manifestations of the consequences of political cynicism's use, which rightly led to a decrease in the legitimacy of the state's political management.

The conducted study shows that the overwhelming majority of post-Soviet states (with the exception being the Baltic states) have not managed to get rid of the universal Soviet legacy in the form of political cynicism. On the contrary, after gaining independence and building various forms of statehood, the level of trust in the states' political management had sharply declined. The explanation for this is an excessive manifestation of political cynicism in the political elites' activity. In the last decade, there has been a «political depersonalization of cynicism», which is also a frightening process, since as a result a consistently high level of manifestation of political cynicism can lead to the danger to statehood's existence.

In the long term, the impact of post-Soviet political cynicism is that such a mechanism of value decline «politically corrupts and suppresses» the authority of the elite political groups themselves, making them internally sterile, unproductive and unfruitful. As a result, it can lead to the disappearance of any ideas about the future, the ability to make choices and changes, to introduce new meanings or guidelines for the states' further development. The danger of an inconsistent policy using the tools of political cynicism poses a threat of a geopolitical scale, forms permanent mistrust and leads to the complete discrediting of state structures.

Thereby a prerequisite for chaos and disorientation of modern political relations is created, which in turn forms the background for the further formation of geopolitical confrontations and regional interstate and intrastate socio-civil, ethnic and political conflicts.

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